San Jose State University

From the Selected Works of Jason A. Laker

December 21, 2014

How College Works

Jason A. Laker, San Jose State University
Abstract
How College Works, by Daniel F. Chambliss and Christopher G. Takacs reports on a 15-year ethnographic study of students’ experiences at Hamilton College, at which the authors serve on the faculty. Their focus is on both mundane and notable elements of students’ undergraduate years at the College, attempting to elucidate those aspects that advance or constrain collegiate success in learning and degree achievement. Nearly 400 students were interviewed during the study period, eliciting a substantial cache of stories that are analyzed according to the fundamental question associated with the book’s title. The authors’ intention is to understand how planning decisions and organizational arrangements might be modified with little or no cost to achieve greater educational and experiential quality.

Review
How College Works reports on the methods and findings of an ambitious and elaborate 15-year ethnographic study of Hamilton College by the authors, long-standing faculty at that prestigious institution. Their project began in 1999 at the behest of then President Eugene Tobin and Dean of Faculty David Paris, and was eventually provided funding by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for the past 10 years. In Chapter One, the authors begin their story by posing questions that resonate with many in higher education: “In an era of fixed or even shrinking resources, can the quality of collegiate education be approved at no additional cost? Can students get more out of college without spending more money?” (p.1) They assert, “We believe the answer is yes. We believe there are methods—simultaneously reliable, powerful, available, and cheap—for improving what students gain from college. Such methods consistently work well, handsomely repay whatever effort goes into them, can be used by almost anyone, and require not much time and almost no additional money” (p.1).

The book is then organized along the lines of the general chronological pathways students navigate from enrollment through to graduation, with chapter titles such as “Entering,” “Choosing,” “The Arithmetic of Engagement,” “Belonging,” “Learning,” “Finishing,” and “Lessons Learned.”
The authors explicitly recognize the critical importance for students to find their place in the social environment, including connecting with friends, as an essential precondition for successfully navigating the academic journey. Early on, the authors remark, “More striking to us, though, was one particular detail of how students mastered these challenges [opportunities and academic learning tasks]—one detail, we might say, of how college actually works in helping students succeed. Time after time, in descriptions of a wide variety of situations, students told us how encounters with the right person could make a decisive difference in their college careers.” The book includes many excerpts and examples from an impressive 394 total interview participants where a student had a variety of needs and viewpoints, what was done, the impact and implications for colleges wishing to do better for their students.

The authors confidently argue that stakeholders, from senior executives to middle managers, and to some extent faculty, students and their parents, can receive such dividends with a basic understanding of how college works. Their study, then, was intended to investigate what constitutes a good undergraduate education and to recommend interventions to facilitate that outcome. The pitch is compelling, particularly in the present economic context. So, it is unsurprising that such generous financial support was given by the Mellon Foundation and their institution—along with administrative assistance and significant access to people, spaces and data—to support pursuit of such worthy questions. It also makes sense that this book received the Virginia and Warren Stone Prize, a most prestigious recognition conferred periodically by Harvard University Press for those of its publications that are deemed to be (as described on the Press’ website) an “Outstanding Book on Education and Society” and have “broad and interdisciplinary scope, an ambitious and subtle synthesis of research, and insistence on the impact of educational tradition and change, from Pre-K through professional schools, on contemporary and future society.”

The book itself is organized into eight chapters, first describing the origins of the study, its methods and ongoing development, and then the findings and their implications. The prose is narrative in tone, non-technical and weaves a number of illustrative stories about students and their navigation of the collegiate environment. Mundane tasks such as registration, studying and other instances associated with daily life at the university are elaborated through their connection to broader policy decisions such as course sizes and scheduling. The authors demonstrate how decisions made by Academic leaders are enacted or experienced in practice by
students and faculty, animating a systemic review of the phenomena of institutional life.

This reviewer had two distinct and competing reactions to the book, a very positive and a very negative one. The positive experience came from being stunned and even inspired by the sheer ambition and successful shepherding of such a long, complex, mixed-method, and creative ethnographic research program. The number of people involved, in terms of the development, management, and contributions of data and other support to the study; along with the vast array of participants and interviewees, merit a great deal of respect and appreciation. The authors rightly note at several waypoints that this is a deep study of one prestigious and well-resourced institution. The students who attend Hamilton College are known to be intellectually and personally accomplished, and generally (though not entirely) economically and experientially quite privileged. Chambliss and Takacs ethically and thoughtfully qualify these facts, and recognize that findings might be more applicable at other selective, residential liberal arts colleges more so than other institutional types. There are no criticisms being given about this here. The College is described candidly, and readers can decide for themselves whether something that works at Hamilton might work at their own. In short, it is an elegant and impressive study.

The authors also provide many compelling examples of gaps between conventional wisdom about how to organize academic courses and programs and better ways to achieve institutional goals, such as a particularly good explanation why a focus on small classes (one element in national rankings) actually interferes with better educational experiences for students. Because of these kinds of examples, academic managers would benefit from reading this book. Faculty might benefit from the stories about students’ preferences, aversions and habits regarding various courses and assignments, and find them actionable for their teaching approach.

However, the book was also provocative to this reader because of what it is missing. This reaction stems from the reviewer’s unusual career trajectory involving 20 years as a Student Affairs practitioner while simultaneously developing as a teacher and scholar. This involved beginning as an entry-level Residence Hall Director, moving through the administrative ranks at six different institutions in the U.S. and Canada, ultimately overseeing Student Affairs Divisions at two different universities, and teaching in several disciplines until currently as a tenured, Full Professor in a graduate counselor education department. This peculiar
background defied a hegemony of disciplinary silos and pigeonholes of role and institutional type, generating a perspective framed by many different angles in the Academy. This is by no means intended to tout a CV, but rather to explain the basis for substantial frustration experienced while reading.

The authors fittingly point to the reality that, “From an administrator’s perspective, then, students’ lived world can seem quite limited, their lines of sight rather short and their angle of vision rather narrow” (p.2). This is said as a preface to how students also have limited ideas about what they need in order to be successful, with an example given about their preference for suite-style dormitories whereas sharing a bathroom increases peer interactions. This reviewer would extend their valuable assertion by suggesting no one person or group has an adequate vision for what is happening, what is needed, or whether an intervention would work at a college. This is the basis for the primary critique of the text, limiting its broader potential for actionable advice.

To be specific, the book’s fundamental question of how college works is answered mainly in terms of faculty-student relationships. There is no question that the official reason to attend college is to study for a degree in a particular discipline. Even though there are myriad less official reasons, it seems clear that attendance, retention, learning, and degree achievement are—and should be—centered as fundamental. However, even that endeavor can’t happen without the many other humans involved in the process. These include admissions counselors, tutors, advisors, residence staff, peer and residence advisors, disability resource specialists, multicultural advisors, dining hall cooks and servers, psychological counselors, physicians and nurses, writing specialists, athletic coaches, and the variety of colleagues who offer their creative and committed attention to students. These also include housekeepers, risk managers, exterminators, accountants, plumbers, network technicians, groundskeepers, those who maintain and clean classrooms and faculty offices, process their paychecks, order and stock textbooks, and the list goes on. Without all of these people, and many others, college doesn’t work.

Moreover, even the authors would likely agree that college is more than just about a degree; it is a socializing phenomenon, rite of passage, and arguably a ritual of social reproduction or reform (depending on one’s analysis or aspiration). Readers are encouraged to read Mitchell Stevens’ creative treatment of higher education’s role in social reproduction in Creating a Class: College Admissions and the Education of Elites (2009,
also by Harvard University Press) or a more holistic examination of students’ lived experiences at college in Rebekah Nathan’s *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student* (2006, Penguin Books).

This text would also benefit from a less clinical treatment of social identities such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and so forth, and their implications for the questions explored in the book. There are a number of references to such things, but they come across as incidental or underdeveloped. For example, on p. 52-53 the authors write, “A fair number of students, including many men, as well as a large proportion of international students and ethnic minorities, say they prefer faculty-student relationship be and remain at this strictly professional level. It’s hard to know whether this is always a true preference; some international and minority students told us they were hesitant to attempt any contact with professors outside of class, whether or not they want it.” There is such a rich set of possibilities for analysis here, such as what a “true preference” is or isn’t, and how to find out; or whether certain students hold historic hesitations about interacting with people with authority over their success, and how to overcome that to achieve socially safe and authentic relationships that increase retention and learning. The retention, learning and satisfaction rate differences between demographically different students call for such analysis, but this text doesn’t sufficiently pursue it beyond such cursory remarks as, “Classes and students really are different things, different kinds of things, and what’s good for one may not be what’s good for the other” (p. 73).

The authors made certain to recognize and address the more likely critique that Hamilton College is an elite institution, potentially limiting the study’s generalizability. That’s fair enough, but this reviewer would argue that if there is an elitism problem, it is not because it is Hamilton College. Rather, it would be because the foundational question of HOW college works almost completely ignores its companion question, WHO makes it work, privileging the faculty perspective in too narrow a way. These are inextricably bound, and it is not an abstraction or some egalitarian sensibility to note it.

Even in the context of a small residential college such as Hamilton, the relative intimacy and expensive tuition that facilitates greater faculty-student interaction has its limitations. Full-time students will attend four or five courses per term, some faculty office hours and tutorials, and possibly the occasional charming and meaningful experience of a meal or research experience with a professor. But students will also live in communal arrangements, participate in campus activities, socialize or work in the host
community, possibly face medical or psychological issues, existential angst, trouble at home, and a host of daily business demands such as financial aid, transportation needs, and use of social and hygienic facilities. These are but a few of the things enabled by the stakeholders and contributors not present in the study, or perhaps only mentioned in passing. Even a cursory review of Hamilton’s website will demonstrate a rich collection of resources and opportunities available to students aside from its formidable faculty, and these types of offerings are not limited to prestigious institutions. Had these elements of the College been studied and reported on in earnest, this reviewer believes the book would have considerable applicability to many institutional contexts. The authors do a fantastic job of explaining how courses or academic programs work, and academic administrators and faculty concerned with improving their pedagogical approaches would benefit from reading it. But, more study is needed to explain how college works, when and why it doesn’t, and what can be done about it.